



Round Island or Qayassiq “Place to go in a Kayak” Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary & National Natural Landmark, Bristol Bay, Alaska

By Jeanne M. Schaaf

The Round Island archeological site is significant as the oldest dated coastal site, by over 3,000 years, in Alaska north of the Alaska Peninsula. The site has clear evidence of island-based walrus hunting about 5,700 years ago (3790 BC) and again 3,600 years ago (1630 BC). Over 100 mapped prehistoric surface depressions on Round Island represent semi-subterranean houses, cold storage pits and other activity areas from settlements affiliated with the Norton and Thule cultural traditions spanning the last 2,500 years before contact in the late eighteenth century (*Figure 1*). Excellent bone preservation in the site’s major occupations provides an important opportunity to better understand the prehistoric subsistence economies and their environments as well as the natural history of important marine species from mid-Holocene times.

Round Island, known as *Qayassiq* (“place to go in a kayak”) by local Yup’iq

speakers, is one of seven islands protected in the Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary, located in northern Bristol Bay, Alaska (*Figures 2 and 3*). The sanctuary was established in 1960 primarily to protect what was then the last remaining terrestrial haulout for Pacific walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus divergens*) in North America (*Figure 4*). The sanctuary attained National Natural Landmark status in 1968, adding nationwide recognition to the importance of this area for its concentration of Pacific walrus, with Round Island in particular serving as a summer haulout for male walrus.

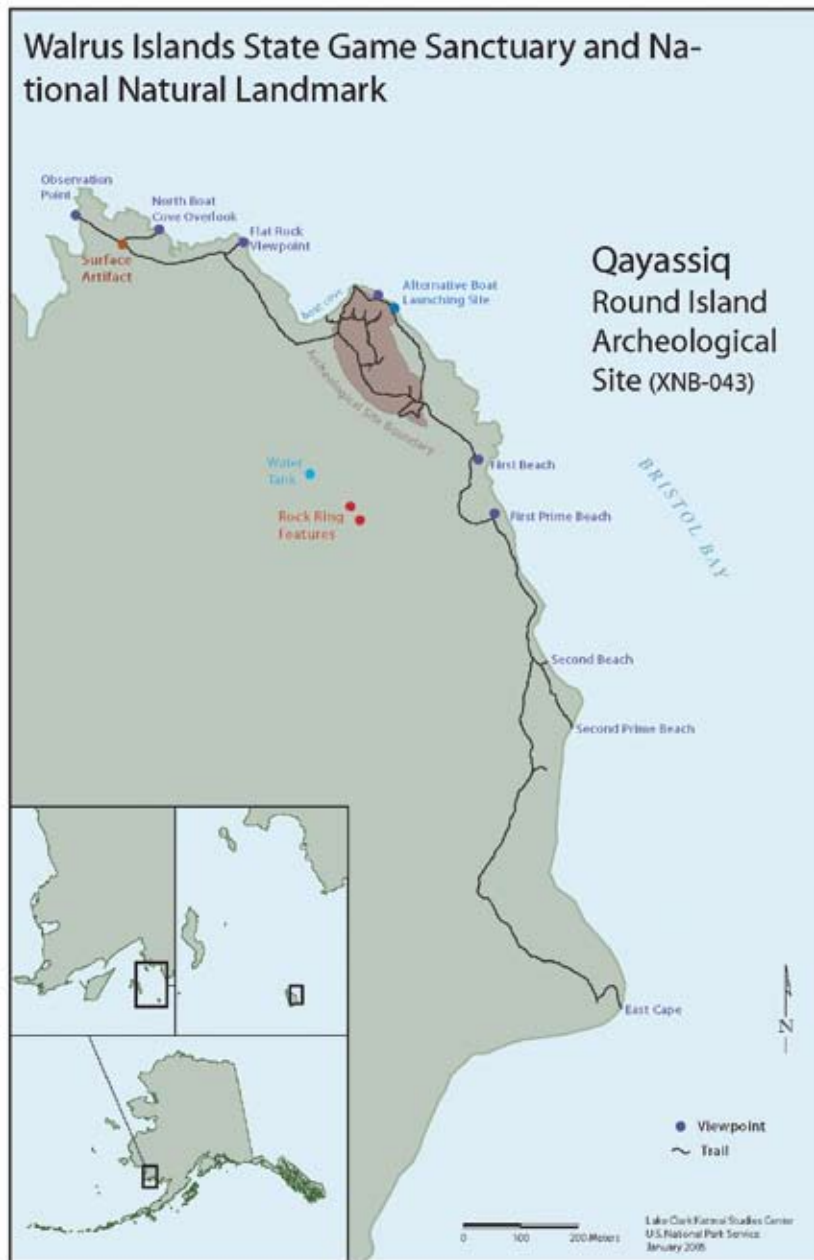
Round Island is the southeastern-most island in the sanctuary, located 63 miles southwest of Dillingham and 35 miles south/southeast of the villages of Togiak and Twin Hills in Togiak Bay. Sheer-walled, granodiorite cliffs rising to an elevation of 1,400 feet (420 m) encircle the island, except for a low bench along the northeastern shore, where the site and the only boat landings are located (*Figure 5*). Only 1.3 square miles (3.4 sq. km) in area, Round

Island is seasonally home for as many as 14,000 walrus, hundreds of Steller sea lions and 250,000 nesting seabirds (*Figure 6*). Grey, humpback, minke and orca whales pass by, sometimes feeding offshore in the spring on their migration north. This area is one of Bristol Bay’s principal spawning areas of herring and yellowfin sole, and all five species of Pacific salmon are found here. The vegetation is a mosaic of wet and dry tundra, meadow and herb communities, and the site area is a bluejoint grass meadow.

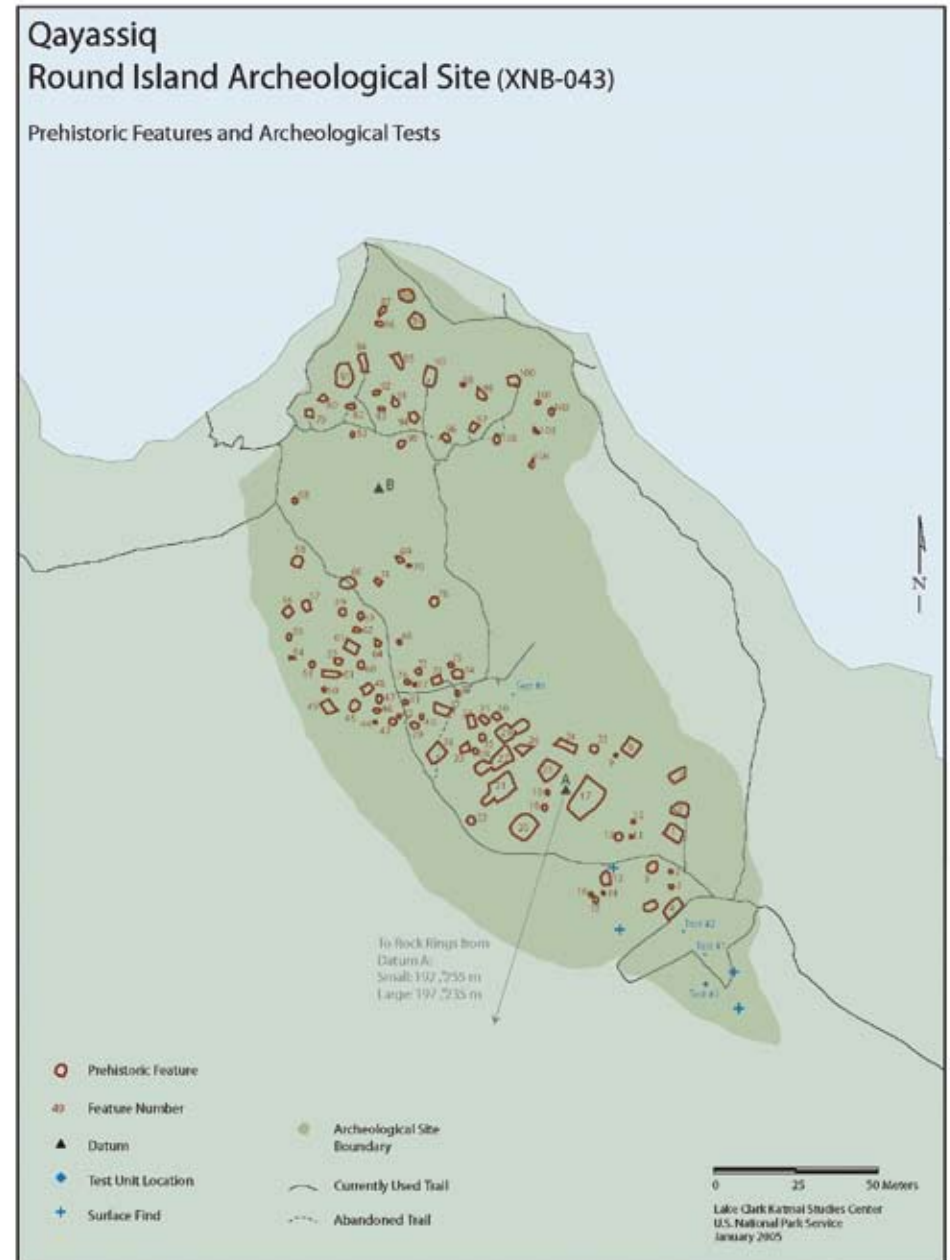
While the entire area that is now Bristol Bay was under glacial ice during the maximum extent of Pleistocene glaciations, ice during the last glacial maximum 20,000 years ago was confined in this region to the Ahklun Mountains north of the Walrus Islands and to the Alaska Peninsula (*Figure 7*). The Walrus Islands were high ground, overlooking part of the vast southern Bering Land Bridge plain, exposed when sea level was 300 feet (90 m) lower than it is today. As the plain flooded and the land rebounded from the

Figure 1. Surface depressions from semi-subterranean houses, storage pits, and other activities can be seen on Round Island.

National Park Service photograph by Jeanne Schaaf



National Park Service map produced by Barbara Burdy



National Park Service map produced by Barbara Burdy

Figure 2. Location of the Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary, Qayassiq or Round Island and site XNB-043.

Figure 3. A site area of 5.7 acres (2.3 hectares) was defined, containing 105 surface depressions thought to be prehistoric features. The feature outlines are sometimes irregularly angular because they are drawn from the GPS data and are dependent on the point recorded.

weight of the ice, areas of high ground became increasingly smaller islands, reaching their present configuration by 2,000 years ago when sea level was within three feet (1 m) of today's level. The Walrus Islands were still part of the mainland 8,000 years ago when sea level was about 50 feet (15 m) below present, but by 6,000 years ago it rose to within 30 feet (9 m) of present sea level, and Round Island became separated from the other islands and the mainland (12 miles/19 km distant at its nearest point). It was around this time that people first camped on the island and hunted walrus with spear-mounted, chipped stone points.

Two radiocarbon dates, 3680 BC and 3790 BC, and some artifacts from the earliest occupation identified on Round Island indicate that this occupation is contemporaneous with the Northern Archaic tradition (Figure 8). On the north side of Cape Newenham, 70 miles (110 km) west of Round Island, the earliest coastal sites are recorded in Security Cove and are assigned to the Northern Archaic tradition based only on artifact types (Ackerman 1998). These sites are thought to represent seasonal excursions to the coast by inland-based caribou hunters using spear-mounted and usually side-notched points. Inland Northern Archaic sites are recorded near the mouth of Goodnews River, in the Ahklun Mountains and at Kagati Lake where the hunters constructed stone cairn drive lines to channel caribou into a small lake around 2200 BC.

Following the Northern Archaic people, the Arctic Small Tool culture is represented

in this region by a few scattered mainland sites. It is securely identified and dated at only one site, located 100 miles (160 km) northeast in the Wood River chain of lakes draining into Nushagak Bay. Bureau of Indian Affairs archeologists excavated small shelters with slab-lined hearths at the site dating between 1600 BC and 1500 BC and found small, finely chipped end blades and scrapers, characteristic of Arctic Small Tool assemblages. This culture practiced a mixed subsistence economy, seasonally balancing terrestrial (caribou and fish) and marine (seal) resource use. On Round Island, there is evidence of a localized but substantial occupation occurring 2,100 years after the earliest hunters camped there. Radiocarbon dated to 1630 BC, the occupation is contemporaneous with Arctic Small Tool sites on the mainland and shares some elements in stone tool technology (Figure 9). Both the earliest and this component at Round Island were identified in limited test excavations in a very small area of the overall 5.7-acre site. The limited number of artifacts recovered from these occupations at this time does not allow certain identification of cultural affiliation.

Prior to the recent archeological discoveries on Round Island, the earliest recorded coastal sites in northwestern Bristol Bay were dated to the Norton tradition, beginning about 500 BC. With about a 600-year gap between dated Arctic Small Tool sites, villages of the related Norton tradition are found along the coast of western Alaska and up major river drainages. Robert Shaw documented five sites dated from 500 BC to AD 1300 on

Summit Island, located within the Walrus Island Sanctuary, just off the mainland coast and about 19 miles (30 km) north of Round Island (Shaw 1998). Summit Island was occupied intermittently beginning 2,500 years ago, during a time when large village sites affiliated with the Norton tradition became widespread in this area. Shaw proposed that this was the result of a population increase and innovations in net fishing and possibly food storage technologies. Several other Norton sites have been studied in this region, in Chagvan Bay just northeast of Security Cove, on nearby Hagemeister Island, in the Wood River/Tikchik Lakes drainage and on the northern Alaska Peninsula.

The Norton tradition in this region spans about 1,500 years and traits include thin, well-made ceramics, with fiber or sand temper and often decorated with linear or check stamping, square or rectangular houses, notched stone net sinkers, stone lamps, small bifacially flaked side and end blades, and some use of ground slate (Figure 10). The Norton culture on Round Island is represented by several of these artifact types, diagnostic chipped stone points and many well-defined single-roomed square houses lacking apparent entries. These houses, associated with cache pits for food storage, occur in at least two distinct clusters that may represent temporally distinct settlements. Two radiocarbon dates from the Norton culture occupations on Round Island are 10 BC and AD 50 and it follows the preceding occupation by about 1,600 years.



Figure 4. Sanctuary personnel and volunteers observe and document wildlife daily on Round Island.



Figure 5. View of Round Island.

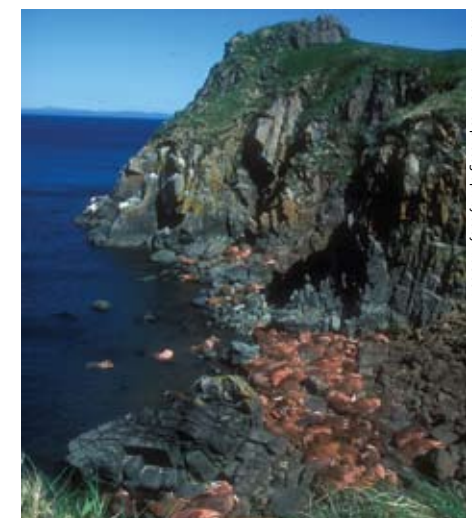


Figure 6. Round Island is seasonally home to as many as 14,000 walrus, the highest number counted in a single day in 1977.

National Park Service photograph by Judy Alderson

NPS photograph by Judy Alderson

National Park Service photograph by Judy Alderson

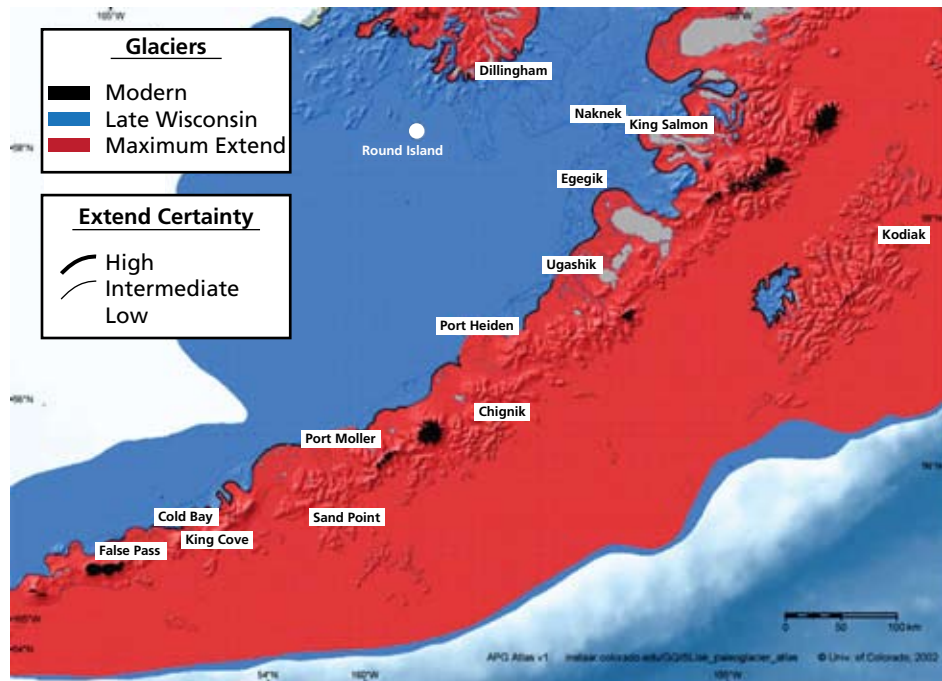


Figure 7. Maximum extent of glacial ice in the Pleistocene (blue) and during the late Wisconsin glaciation (red).

Sometime after 1000 AD, the Norton culture was replaced or absorbed by a northern maritime-based culture, the Thule tradition, directly ancestral to the Yu'pik-speaking people inhabiting the area, including the Tuvuryarmiut of Togiak Bay, at the time of contact. The Thule occupation on Round Island occupies the center and the highest land within the site area at 132 feet (40 m) above sea level. It has large deep house depressions, at least three with storm sheds or entry rooms and a very large rectangular depression measuring 24 by 40 feet (7 x 12 m), that is probably a men's community house or *qasgik* (Figure 11). The Thule village has several cache depressions and some sod borrow areas are apparent.

The late prehistory and history of this immediate area is best told in the report of the 1960 excavations at Old Togiak on the mainland by Makoto Kowta (1963). Kowta's analysis of the occupations and artifacts dated by typology from 1000 AD to 1700 AD showed a mixed economy with emphasis on both land and sea hunting and fishing, with shellfish collecting becoming increasingly important through time. Antler armor slats found in the upper levels of the site indicate increasing levels of technological sophistication and warfare. A decrease through time in seal remains at Old Togiak may have resulted from over-hunting or environmental change. This may have forced residents to diversify and abandon winter settlements



Figure 8. Walrus skull with broken spear point. Tip of arrow scale is the location of the wood charcoal sample, with calibrated range of 3730-3590 BC.

in the summer months for fishing and hunting inland. This is the subsistence pattern practiced by the Tuvuryarmiut at the time of contact (see also VanStone 1967).

Round Island was named by Captain James Cook when he sailed across Bristol Bay, briefly stopping at Cape Newenham in 1778. Togiak Bay was bypassed by most early exploration, until 1819 when the Russian Fort Alexandrovsk was established at Nushagak. But even as late as 1890 and despite commercial activities in the Bay, the isolation of the Tuvuryarmiut is evident in travelers' descriptions of them. The transition for Togiak residents from sea mammal hunting with skin boats and hand-held harpoons to guns, wooden boats and out-board motors occurred during the 1930s

and 1940s. Round Island was a primary walrus-hunting site before and after the transition, until it was closed to hunting in 1960. Limited walrus hunting by Togiak residents was resumed in 1995 (Fall et al. 1991).

Acknowledgements

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More information about the National Natural Landmarks program and about other Natural Landmarks in Alaska is

available at: http://www.nature.nps.gov/nnl/Registry/USA_Map/States/Alaska/alaska.cfm

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National Park Service scan by Barbara Bundy

Figure 9. A small, finely worked side blade recovered from Round Island and dated to about 3,300 years ago suggests an Arctic Small Tool tradition occupation.



National Park Service scan by Barbara Bundy

Figure 10: A notched stone net weight is evidence of the emphasis on net fishing during the Norton tradition.



National Park Service photograph by Judy Aderson

Figure 11. A measuring tape is strung along one side of a depression that is probably a men's community house or *qasgik* and is central to a Thule tradition settlement at Round Island sometime after 1000 years ago.

Figure 12. Bristol Bay Native Association interns Paul Askoak and Chasity Anelon assist sanctuary managers launch a boat from the boat cove.



National Park Service photograph by Jeanne Scharf

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